

# 1881-1956 : the Wattwil school of weaving

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1881-1956

## THE WATTWIL SCHOOL OF WEAVING

*The Swiss Institute for Vocational Training in Spinning,  
Twisting and Weaving*

The foundation of this vocational training establishment goes back to the days when the weaving industry of Toggenburg, at one time prosperous and famous all over the world, was experiencing great difficulties. The period after the 1870/71 Franco-Prussian war was one of crisis all over Switzerland, not only for the colour weaving mills of Toggenbourg, but also for the world-famous silk mills and the watchmaking industry, all of which were up against the same difficulties. There was therefore nothing surprising in the fact that in all these industries there was a growing demand for the establishment of vocational training schools. In fact, both the Zurich School of Silk Weaving and the Chaux-de-Fonds School of Watchmaking were founded in the same year as the Wattwil school, i.e. 1881.

Fritz Abderhalden, a cantonal councillor and native of Toggenburg, was the first to dare to put finger on the trouble. Deeply moved, he said: « If our economy continues to decline for another twenty years at the same pace, I maintain — and it is no exaggerated pessimism on my part — that Toggenburg will then be in the unfortunate position of being able to contemplate the ruins of its former prosperity, a disaster for which it alone will be responsible! »

It was the foresight and courage of this man that succeeded in surmounting the pusillanimity of the others and in persuading industrialists and the authorities of the need to establish a vocational training school in order to provide new recruits for the administrative staff and workers of the Toggenburg colour weaving mills, to propagate the technical knowledge that was so sadly lacking and to look for new ideas in weaving.

Abderhalden could never have imagined in those early days that the vocational training school founded according to his ideas would be profitable not only to his local district of Toggenburg, but much farther afield, to the whole of Switzerland in fact. Today, 75 years later, his sound, sensible ideas are still perfectly up to date. His warning and the systematic way he went about overcoming the difficulties met with success. On February 18th, 1881 the decision was made to found the new school and by the end of the same year the first courses were

already being held with seventeen pupils. The beginning was a very modest one: the school was housed in premises rented for the purpose and the principal items of equipment were four hand looms and one mechanical loom. But the stars smiled on this enterprising concern and in 1890 the school was able to move into its own premises. Contemporary records reveal that the total cost amounted to 110,000 francs. The School Board possessed 58,000 francs, but was expecting an important subsidy from the Confederation.

In 1902, Mr. Friedrich Hofman, the first director, was obliged to retire for reasons of health; for twenty-one years he had been laying the foundations for a great future and accomplished much with the very limited means at his disposal.

From the fifty candidates who applied for the post of new director, the Board chose Mr. Andreas Frohmader, who threw himself wholeheartedly into the job; for forty-one years he remained the director of this establishment which under his inspired guidance and untiring devotion grew from a small local school of weaving in Toggenburg into an im-

portant Swiss vocational training school.

1906 marked the 25th anniversary of the foundation of the school, a very important landmark in its development. This anniversary focussed the attention of very wide circles on Wattwil and it was realised just how necessary this establishment was. At that time it possessed fifteen hand looms and an equal number of mechanical looms. But warping still had to be carried out on a hand warping frame and there was only one room for the theoretical instruction to be given to all classes — and the number of pupils was increasing every year! A steadfast determination enabled Mr. Frohmader to overcome the greatest obstacles. In 1909, it was decided to enlarge the premises, and the new buildings were completed on October 1st, 1911. This expansion cost about 160,000 francs, a sum partially covered by a special fund of 70,000 francs and a public subscription which yielded 100,000 francs. There remained therefore a building debt of 40,000 francs which was covered by a mortgage.

But in spite of all difficulties, the school prospered.



Mr. Friedrich Huber, Honorary President of the School's Board of Governors, delivering his speech on the occasion of the 75th anniversary celebrations. Right: the « landamman » Clavadetscher of St. Gall; left: Mr. Riedener, State Councillor of St. Gall; in the foreground, Mr. Max Stoffel of St. Gall.

In the autumn of 1931 it celebrated its 50th anniversary with an impressive commemoration ceremony attended by a large number of visitors. During the next 25 years the school developed extremely rapidly. The difficult periods that Swiss industry as a whole experienced during the 30's and after were particularly hard on the textile branch. All were unanimous in agreeing that only by means of particularly skilled recruits, at all stages of production, could it be hoped to save the industry from total ruin. That is why the school has to continue to improve and perfect the training of technical and commercial personnel, and to adapt them to the increasingly exacting needs of the day.

During this period of evolution, in the autumn of 1943, the director, Mr. Frohmader, retired after having won the lasting gratitude of the school and the textile industry by the way in which he had devoted himself for forty-one years to the accomplishment of his duties as director and master.

His successor was the present director, Mr. Schubiger, an engineer, who completely revised the syllabus. The pupils were grouped into smaller classes, according to the type and amount of instruction they wished to receive. The school specialised to a great extent in the instruction of pupils wishing to become work's managers, weaving technicians, weaving designers and textile merchants while the requirements of the wool textile industry were met by the engagement of a special master for the teaching of the subjects in this branch. In 1949, the syllabus was greatly extended by the addition of a department for spinning and twisting, techniques which up till then could only be learned in foreign schools.



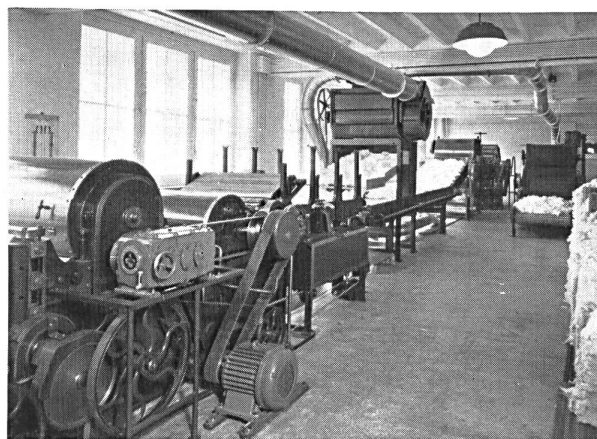
The main building of the Wattwil School of Weaving.

It was then realised that with the new, extremely varied programme, the existing lecture room and machine hall were no longer adequate. To meet this critical situation the General Assembly of June 27th, 1944 decided that energetic measures were necessary and that a vast new expansion plan would have to be considered. On May 16th, 1946, the plan was far enough advanced for the General Assembly to decide on the construction of a new building and the adaptation of the existing building to the new requirements. The financial side of the problem had been settled meanwhile thanks in particular to the disinterested efforts of the manufacturers Ed. Meyer-Mayor, Neu-St.-Johann, and Friedrich Huber, of Uzwil. The whole industry rose to the occasion and showed great generosity, while the authorities and trade associations were all most helpful.

The work of building was begun on July 1st, 1946 and carried out by stages so that the courses should not be



The new premises built in 1950.



Cleaning plant in the « spinning » department.

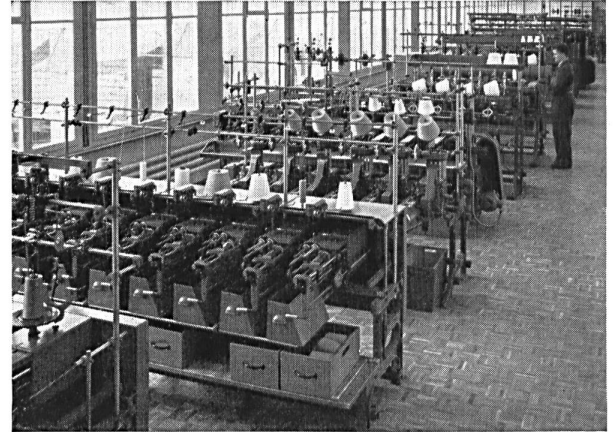
interrupted. At the end of 1950 the work was completed and the result was extremely satisfactory, for the building accounts revealed no unpleasant surprises!

The new buildings were opened on June 14th in a solemn ceremony attended by Mr. Rubattel, the Federal

industry, the textile trade and the textile machinery industry. The importance of the task fulfilled by the Wattwil school on behalf of industry and trade can be seen from the fact that, from its foundation until the anniversary year 1956, more than 2,400



Spinning room.



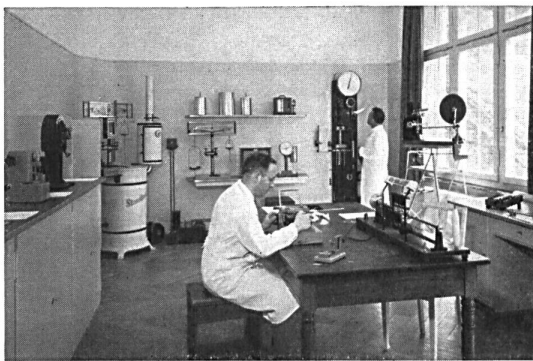
Machines for preparing for weaving.

Councillor, representing the government of the Confederation, as well as delegations from numerous cantonal councils, representatives of the authorities and the trade associations and a great number of friends and benefactors of the school. On this occasion, the first vote of thanks went to the president, Fr. Huber, whose optimism

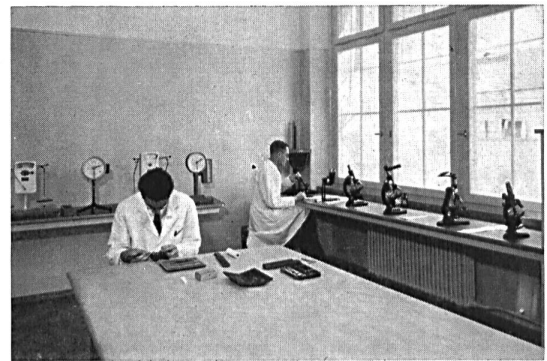
students have received their vocational training there.

In October this year, the celebration of the 75th anniversary of the establishment was attended by a very large number of guests.

May this institution, which from very modest beginnings has today become a teaching establishment famous



Testing laboratory.



Microscopy room.

and tenacious spirit of initiative had been instrumental in making it possible to carry out this project which cost almost 1.5 million francs, and enabling the school to move into new premises entirely free from debt.

In its present form, the school trains some sixty to seventy young men and women each year for the textile

all over Switzerland and abroad, continue to develop and remain indispensable and profitable to the Swiss textile industry as a whole.

MR. SCHUBIGER.  
Director  
*Wattwil.*